

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

### **"What makes my image of him into an image of him?": Philosophers on film and the question of educational meaning**

The ideas informing this paper have been developed somewhat in tandem with preparations for a new module I am delivering to third year undergraduates on the subject of Film as Education. In thinking through the rationale for such a module, I was aware that I would have to address two issues: firstly, a critique of a particular mode of theorising that currently prevents against a broader educational reach of film in teaching; secondly, the ways that I believe film, unconstrained by this mode of theorising, can teach my students something about teaching and education itself. This paper attempts to address both issues, in an endeavour to take seriously the idea of film as philosophy, and film as a philosopher-teacher.

#### **Film's current use in education: illustration and explanation**

My discussion proceeds from an intuition that film can be educational in a broader sense than its current use in classrooms or lecture theatres for illustrative purposes. This is not to deny any evidence that using film illustratively in class can further engage student interest across disciplines. In recent years, books such as *Math Goes to the Movies* (Polster & Ross, 2012) and *Teaching with the Screen* (Leopard, 2013) have provided innovative examples of the informative ways in which moments in films can illuminate not just particular problems within certain disciplines, but also the practice of dealing with them. I myself use film illustratively in this way, but have noticed that this illuminating function does not necessarily differ from other illustrative modes of pedagogy (asking students to "Imagine that..."). For example, when I show the 'two-boats' scene from Christopher Nolan's Batman film *The Dark Knight* (2008) to demonstrate Kantian or Benthamite approaches to

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

moral dilemmas, this is little more than a visual representation of the well-known 'trolley problem' thought experiment. The scene establishes a relationship between image and idea that has little to do with the film itself. This is because the video – the thing seen – is secondary to the pedagogic principle under discussion, and its effectiveness in illustrating the principle is therefore more dependent on an intervention on the part of a teacher, i.e. *my* explanation of what makes the 'two boats' scenario representative of a moral dilemma.

Using film as an illustrative tool helps to explain an idea, because it renders that idea visible, becomes a representation of it. But the illustration of an isolated idea does not account for the whole experience of film-viewing, because its meaning relates to the principle under illustration, not to the meaning of the film as a whole. The experience of *The Dark Knight* viewed in its entirety and actuality cannot be reduced to any one scene, or a single governing idea (e.g. the conflict of moral codes). Film finds fuller expression not as the *representation* of something which transcends the activity within it, but as the *presentation* of many things to an audience whose perspective is governed by the context of viewing. Our appreciation of film is diminished when detached from its contingency, or when the internal coherence of theoretical interpretation supersedes the nuances of contingency in the areas to which it is applied. To adopt a filmic metaphor, blanket or blueprint applications of theory can risk "green-screening" the object of study, such that its meaning remains essentially the same whether against this background or that background.

Wittgenstein objects to this essentialism in the *Philosophical Investigations* as follows:

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

"When philosophers use a word – 'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name' – and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?

What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."

(RPP, 1, §116)

Any attempt to capture the essence of a thing as abstracted from its surroundings constitutes a disavowal of its actual meaning in use. The notion of essence, once the mainstay of phenomenology in its Husserlian formulation, was also called into question by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty insisted that any essence of a thing was always conditioned by its existence in the world, meaning that any understanding of it was necessarily dependent upon the particular perspective of a perceiving subject, and in relation to everything else in what he called the "phenomenal field" (or "surroundings", in Wittgensteinian terms). The illustrative instance, then, however useful, always risks reproducing this grasping at essences, a thing's objective character, by abstracting from the wider *existence*, in which things occur – their subjectivity.

### **The critique of psychologism**

To retrace the limits of the illustrative mode in education is to return to the critiques of psychologism offered by Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein in the mid-twentieth century, in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (first published in French in 1945) and *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (probably completed in 1949). According to Merleau-Ponty, there exists a fundamental fallacy in what he calls classical psychology, which he understands as the inheritance of Cartesian

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

and Kantian introspectionism. Descartes' 'Third Meditation' sets the tone with a suspicion towards sensory perception as that which deceives the mind:

"I am a thing that thinks, that is to say that doubts, affirms, denies, that knows a few things, that is ignorant of many, that wills, that desires, that also imagines and perceives; for...these modes of thought that I call perceptions and imaginations, inasmuch as they are modes of thought, certainly reside [and are met with] in me."

(Descartes, 1969, p.179)

It is this first and last assumption, that of the *cogito* and its primacy, that characterises a shift towards an ingrained introspection in Western philosophy that Merleau-Ponty describes as the detachment of the subject from the world, "by showing that I could not possibly apprehend anything as existing unless I first of all experienced myself in the act of apprehending it" (2008, p.x). In establishing the mind as the only entity upon which a rational self could depend, the opening of Descartes' eyes reveals for him not the world as it is (i.e. as a disorder independent of his existence), but a world of representation that is ordered by the mind that sees. The 'pictures' of the world are objects whose relation to the idea is one of a perfection that it can only attain via the thinking subject. The metaphysics of the image, then, is entirely abstracted from a world in which, according to Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, it actually makes a lot more sense to say that we see things as they appear in the immediacy of our perception and in relation to each other, rather than in relation to an *a priori* idea of them. Why shut out the world in order to understand it, to divide it up into ideas that are not reflected in the actual experiencing of it?

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

The revolution in thought that takes place with(in) Descartes instates the mind as a self-governing entity: "I am a thing that thinks". But the fallacy of the classical psychology, as Merleau-Ponty terms it, is twofold: one, that the world is composed as a "mosaic" of external facts and truths (i.e. separable and universal); and two, that I experience these facts and truths via sensations which my brain interiorises and makes sense of. Merleau-Ponty takes issue on both counts. He argues that the world always appears to us as a whole (the phenomenal field), not in its divisible elements, and sensation is not something experienced as an impression on the mind, but is a property of an object in relation to its surroundings: "This red patch which I see on the carpet is red, only in virtue of a shadow which lies across it, its quality is apparent only in relation to the play of light upon it, and hence as an element in a spatial configuration" (2008, p.5). The redness of the patch is not an essence that can be called red, but a matter of its being perceived in relation to other qualities of any given environment. To give expression to that quality of redness is only possible as a description, within those circumstances, rather than an explanation that can account for the essence of that quality.

Similarly to Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* criticises the "tendency to explain" whereby the meaning of things somehow transcends the experiencing of them, not least because explanation relies on growth "from a certain germ", the source of knowing that precedes the experience of things:

"Mere description is so difficult because one believes that one needs to fill out the facts in order to understand them. It is as if one saw a screen with scattered colour-patches, and said: the way they are here, they are unintelligible; they only make sense when one

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

completes them into a shape – Whereas I want to say: here is the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it.)"

(RPP, I, §257)

The implication, of course, is that to complete the scattered patches of colour, you would have to know the shape you wanted to form them into in advance, such that that the screen and its patches of colour are secondary to the shape – their meaning is predetermined by it. Wittgenstein here also points to the troubled inheritance of Cartesian thought: the possibility of a complete or final understanding in which thing and idea coincide in their perfect meaning. He indirectly alludes to both the intention of Descartes' psychologism, and to the difficulty presented by not submitting to it.<sup>1</sup> The former lies in the desire for making complete sense of things, with one of the most stabilising means to that end being the positioning of one's own mind as the source of the logic and security of meaning; the latter, on the other hand, portends the indefinite destabilisation of meaning, and therefore a lack of control over it.

The reduction of the "scattered colour-patches" of the world to divisible objects that are representations of ideas, effects an objectification in thought that allows for the individual mind to assume some control over the irreducibility of "the whole". Wittgenstein does not explicitly cite Descartes as the origin of this attempt to control an understanding of the image by seeing it as representation of an idea (a "shape"), but rather critiques the possibility of this control on the grounds of its own faulty logic: just as Descartes is wrong to take his experience of his self as the source of understanding self in relation to the world, so "it would be just as wrong to use an

---

<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty makes a similar observation in relation to the interpretation of texts: "Now if we rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an original text, we shall see that the idea of *complete* expression is nonsensical, and that all language is indirect or allusive" (1964, p.80)

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

experience of meaning to explain the concept of understanding meaning" (RPP, I, §155). Why say that we have to understand vision before describing what it is we see? To set this kind of reasoning in motion is to set up precisely the dichotomy that both Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty seek to overcome: a dichotomy between things and our consciousness and expression of them, an opposition between inner and outer, subject and object. The resolution of this dichotomy for both is all too frequently to be found in theorising whose internal coherence seeks to control – rather than address – the external symbiosis between the coherence and chaos of phenomena.

### **Psychologism and theory's control over the visual**

The allure of controlling one's own view of the world in this way has meant that Cartesian philosophy has contributed to an enduring psychologism within theorising itself (Standish, 2012). In using the term theorising, I have in mind that mode described by Nancy Bauer as the "attempt to describe and explain phenomena systematically in an internally consistent way that mandates or predicts what should or will happen in relevant future cases" (Bauer, 2015, p.106). From Wittgenstein's point of view, the desire for explanation extends from, and leads back into, the same psychological cul-de-sac, the mind turning in on itself in reassurance of its own primacy of understanding (RPP, I, §212). On the surface of things, new theories can be developed in tune with different phenomena, but the underlying tautology remains unchanged, if theory isolates objects from their meaning in use or action. With regards to film specifically, Stephen Mulhall has observed that film theorists "exhibit a strong tendency to treat the films they discuss as objects to which specific theoretical edifices...could be applied" (Mulhall, 2002, p.6), whereby the object facilitates the coherence of the theory, rather than revealing something new about the object. Film theory can

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

only achieve this by isolating those elements within film that achieve this squaring of circles, rather than addressing an overall complexity that escapes reduction to any theoretical perspective.

Common to the work of both Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, then, is the emphasis on 'the whole picture' as the presentation of objects (words, images, other people) in relation to one another, and the impossibility of capturing that picture, or the essence of the phenomena that comprise it, completely. For Merleau-Ponty, this has to do with accepting that the world exists prior to our experience of it, and our bodies constitute an intervention in that world that makes experience of it possible – they are both objective fact and subjective possibility. For Merleau-Ponty, the experience of being a body makes meaning possible. If the mind were the source of meaning, and not the world to which the mind responds via the body, then it would have no need of expressing itself at all, as it would not need to seek meaning outside of itself:

"We must reject that prejudice which makes "inner realities" out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behaviour or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside."

(Merleau-Ponty, 1982, p.52)

To make inner realities of things is to psychologise them, to create an illusion that analytical reflection somehow precedes the knowing of things, rather than knowledge proceeding from the perceiving of them. But Merleau-Ponty also notes that it is all too tempting to "pass from absolute objectivity to absolute subjectivity, but this second idea is not better than the first and is upheld only against it, which means by it" (2008, p.45). He makes the claim that subjectivity should not be seen



"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell


as the counterpart or flipside to objectivity, because this only culminates in an objectification of the subject. The critiques of an interiorised psychologism expose relations to the world which we see that are too often overdetermined or preconditioned by what it *means* to see (i.e. how we explain the act of seeing), or, to paraphrase Descartes, by what *we think things mean* before we see them. Both instances require the abstraction, either of the seer or the thing seen, that can't account for the implication of both (their simultaneous subjectivity as well as objectivity) in the actual act of seeing.

### Meaningfulness in simultaneity

A common theme in the work of both Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein is the ambiguity of words and images, or their simultaneous appearance. Here is the famous example from Wittgenstein:

"Ought I to say: 'A rabbit may look like a duck'?

Would it be conceivable that someone who knows rabbits but not ducks should say: 'I can

see the drawing  as a rabbit and also in another way, although I have no word for the other aspect"? Later he gets to know ducks and says: "That's what I saw the drawing as that time!' – Why is that not possible?"

(RPP, 1, §70)

For those who know what both ducks and rabbits look like, it would be possible to argue that the image represents one animal or the other. Even if we were to grant that the image is indeed a 'duck-rabbit', it is hard not to see it as now one thing, now the other. It is difficult to give expression to its simultaneity, even in the experience of it. And for someone who has never seen a duck, it is not

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

possible to give expression to even the duality of the image, its ambiguity, even if it can be sensed.

This does not mean that the image does not possess this duality, it is simply that the individual can only give expression to as much of it of which she has experience (it may be that such a thing as 'duck-rabbit' exists out in the wild, though no one has seen it, in which case we are none of us able to give expression to that resemblance either).

The experience of simultaneity frustrates an ability to account for it. Take this other – more embodied – example from Merleau-Ponty:

"Movement and rest distribute themselves in our surroundings not according to the hypotheses which our intelligence is pleased to construct but according to the way we settle ourselves in the world and the position our bodies assume in it. Sometimes I see the steeple motionless against the sky with clouds floating above it, and sometimes the clouds appear still and the steeple falls through space. But here again the choice of the fixed point is not made by the intelligence: the looked-at object in which I anchor myself will always seem fixed, and I cannot take this meaning away from it except by looking elsewhere."

(1982, p.52)

The "hypotheses which our intelligence is pleased to construct" are the abstractions and metaphysics to which we defer as ways of both binding our own experience to that of others, and thereby making the uniqueness of our own experience more bearable. But just as I cannot reduce the 'duck-rabbit' image to being one thing or the other through force of logic, so I am not in control of clouds or steeple as the fixed points of my perception. In exploring both the simultaneity of

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

experience and its non-reducibility to a single explanation, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty are signposting a new direction for the meaningfulness of phenomena that is not dependent upon an idea stable enough for it to directly coincide with its meaning. Unlike Descartes, who needs to know the world before he experiences it through sight, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty invite us to say what it is we experience in the act of seeing, however much we are frustrated by our ability to fully do so.

### **'Naming the prostitute': the representation of philosophers on film**

Saying what we *experience* as meaningful can be difficult when we bring too many of what Merleau-Ponty describes as 'traditional prejudices' – psychological prejudices that favour an objective, or metaphysical, explanation of phenomena – to bear on understanding. This is because traditional prejudices allow the viewer to distinguish parts from the experienced whole, when their meaning is contingent upon their being part *of* the whole. Film indulges these prejudices when it condescends to making visible, or representing, exactly what its audience wants to see, or what it thinks its audience knows in advance. In this, illustration resides not just in instances of a film, but extends to its entirety, with the consequence that the film either affirms, or falls short of, the object to be represented. Films about philosophers make an interesting study in this respect, as representation makes of the philosopher a psychologised being whose mind transcends his 'Being-in-the-world'.

Roberto Rossellini's *Cartesius*, one of a trio of films about philosophers made as part of an explicitly didactic agenda, is exemplary in this regard. The film represents Descartes initially as a young man responding to an intellectual malaise among both the scientists and theologians of his time, all of whom were still in thrall to Aristotelian ideas of logic and the soul. His response might be interpreted

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

two ways: he is either the epitome of Robert Carlisle's Great Man Theory, a uniquely charismatic individual that is compelled to intervene in the course of history for better or worse; or he is a product of his time, a necessary revolutionary brought into existence by the coordinates of intellectual history. The ambiguity is played out in the aesthetics as much as the characterisation: Descartes' restless nomadism, his insistence on experiencing as many 'real' faces of Europe as possible, the microscopic attendance to realist detail in the *mise-en-scène*, the wars and pestilence that frame his interrogation of the human mind – these contingencies are all weighed against Descartes' steadfast self-belief and stability of character, also reflected in the juxtaposition of his mode of dress throughout with that of the various costumes adopted by the others that he encounters. Indeed, the other characters very much act out the roles of automata that Descartes suspected other people might be, and they even seem to say things solely for the benefit of setting up his rational critique.

There is a sense throughout *Cartesius*, then, that Descartes is only struggling with how to articulate that which, in himself, he already knows to be true, rather than with the challenges to truth presented by the world and other people. To view Rossellini's Descartes through Cartesian eyes, then, is to witness him enacting the very psychologism that characterises the *Meditations*, in a manner perhaps not consistent with the didactic intent of the director. The physical presence of Descartes on screen becomes a distraction from the experience of the film as a whole, because he begs his own objectification, drawing the viewer's attention away from its other parts. The dilemma, as Stanley Cavell calls it, is one of 'naming the prostitute': "You want Descartes to be there, but if you just say 'This is Descartes' you've killed it" (2005, p.191). The more explicitly Descartes as a figure looms in the interpretation, the more he becomes an undesirable and immutable presence in

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

the conversation of ideas. Either he is the image of Descartes we had in our minds previously, or he falls short of that image. When Wittgenstein asks "What makes my image of him into an image of him?", the answer is clear: "not its looking like him". Wittgenstein is not interested with degrees of likeness or approximation, but rather what is meant by the image and how it is experienced.

To teach Descartes by means of his representation on screen may therefore be a distraction from what we might learn about Cartesianism through film. Why is this so? Because likeness has no bearing on the way we experience the things we see; likeness corresponds to ideas already existing in our psychological make-up.<sup>2</sup> For the informed viewer, the success of the film's meaning depends on its fulfilling their own preconceived understanding of what Descartes means as philosopher (what makes my image of him into an image of him is my idea of him); for the uninformed (Rossellini's intended audience), the representation of an individual simply is an explanation of the meaning of that individual (if I have not seen either a duck or a rabbit, and I am told that the image is of a duck, I take the image to be that of a duck).

Other films about philosophers are burdened with the same predicament: what the film might have to teach us about the way that thought emerges from its particular circumstances to effect change, is compromised by the concentration of meaning in one object. Everywhere in *Cartesius* and in Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein*, in Tariq Ali's *Spinoza* (1994), Margarethe von Trotta's *Hannah Arendt*

---

<sup>2</sup> This problematic is also in evidence in Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein*, which dispensed with a realist script originally put forward by Terry Eagleton, and proffered a more abstract interpretation of Wittgensteinianism, with brightly coloured characters being played off against a black background. Jarman's attempts to nullify the reduction of his film to biography or philosophy – "My film does not portray or betray Ludwig. It is there to open up" (p.67) – do not escape the problem of foregrounding the philosopher over the film as entity.

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

(2012), or even Kirby Dick's documentary film *Derrida* (2002), the image of the philosopher is already oversubscribed in terms of meaning by preconceptions concerning their representation, such that the viewer feels compelled to reduce it/them to one interpretation or another, to its essence.

### **Objectifying the subject of film theory**

The presence of the philosopher overwhelms the philosophical meaning of film, because it concentrates that meaning in objective representation on the screen. However, the meaning of film can be compromised by the theoretical approaches to film also, when they act as a deterministic authority over film experience. Laura Mulvey's seminal essay on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' continues to be influential enough in film studies to warrant its use as an example here.<sup>3</sup> Mulvey's feminist-psychoanalytic critique of Hollywood cinema rests on the charge that its camera and its characters are complicit in the enactment of a 'controlling male gaze', which reduces all women in its films to passive objects. The idea is easy enough to illustrate by means of a scene from the James Bond film, *Dr No*: I, the viewer, observe Bond asleep on a beach, only to hear the sound of someone singing. Because I don't know the identity of the singer, I immediately identify with the character who is also deprived of that information, Bond, who awakes to the siren call and looks around to discover its origin. I follow his searching gaze, and the thought process it implies, until it lights upon the figure emerging from the sea. The change of expression on Bond's face registers his delight and his fulfilled desire, thereby doing so for the viewer also. The fact that the woman remains unaware of Bond's presence evidences her lack of consciousness, an inability to exercise her own gaze as the object of one – the gaze of the male lead, which directs my own. In this scene Bond

---

<sup>3</sup> Oxford film philosopher Andrew Klevan describes Mulvey's essay as "perhaps the most studied and cited in the history of film scholarship" (2014, p.147).

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

enacts his own cruder version of the Cartesian awakening, opening his eyes to discover that his inner knowledge that women exist for him is confirmed in the reality of a woman appearing to do just that.

By means of the psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey is able to reveal evidence of the male gaze in any number of films. The thesis demonstrates the ways in which the male gaze not only subjugates women within films, but invites a female audience to submit to the patriarchal order which the visual pleasure of cinema imparts. Female subjectivity is suppressed through objectification, whether for the male or female spectator. But what is not acknowledged in this analysis of social control, is the way that the analysis exercises its own form of control over film interpretation. The theorist also enacts the Cartesian awakening, this time to a world in which everywhere film acts as the automaton of the male gaze dressed in cinematographic hats and cloaks. The enlightened theorist can't help but position the spectator as passive and impressionable object, whose only way out of susceptibility is to be alert to the theory beforehand, to do as Descartes, and 'think before one sees'.

According to Nancy Bauer, Mulvey fails to "trust the power of the camera to surprise us when it comes to the question of what it's possible for something or someone to become on film" (2015, p.159). If we don't trust the camera to surprise us, then we also don't trust ourselves to be surprised, to learn something new. For Mulvey, the internal coherence of her theory depends on seeing the spectator as the object of an objectifying gaze. Mulvey thus reproduces the Cartesian scepticism that prevents him from seeing other beings as more than automata; the only hope for

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

subjectivity is the intervention of an enlightened theorist able to explain phenomena according to a single rule.<sup>4</sup>

The articulation of simultaneity goes some way in attesting to, if not motioning beyond, tendencies towards metaphysical abstraction in the theorising of either the object or the subject – whether in philosophy, film, education, or other disciplines. Mulvey's theory, for example, loses its purchase on coherence if the viewer is seen as both object and subject, points in perception that change depending on how long you linger upon them. The spectator would have to be seen as someone who exercises and returns their own gaze(s) over cinema as well as being submitted to the director's objectifying gaze via the cinematic medium.

Film provides an interesting intervention here when it can provide examples of this simultaneity, *provided that* its own simultaneity (as object *and* subject), as well as that of its viewer, is upheld. Film does not just exist to be seen, understood and explained, but to teach the viewer how to see differently. This is to suggest that the film must be seen as something that thinks as well as something that conveys the thoughts and ideas of, say, its director. Experiences of both wonder and disturbance (the frustration of the objectifying *cogito*) that can result from the encounter with simultaneity thereby signal the broader philosophical and educational reach of cinema beyond its illustrative function. Film, when not reduced to component parts seen as representative of particular ideas, is revealed as a medium in which not just some things carry meaning, but – in Stanley Cavell's words – "everything matters – and you do not know what everything means" (p.169).

---

<sup>4</sup> There are parallels here to be drawn between Mulvey's theory and Paulo Freire's pedagogy of *conscientização*.



"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

### **Film as 'doing' philosophy**

What films about philosophers and films that are viewed under the burden of theory have in common is that they reduce the experience of film to stable, static, essences, whereas there exist strong arguments to look at film instead as philosophy in motion, in action (an important point of difference from, say, painting). Stanley Cavell provides an unusual example of how Cartesianism, or at least something of its logic, can be played out through film without the aid of the philosopher incarnate. In Frank Capra's *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*, a seemingly naïve young man from small-town America suddenly inherits an enormous fortune. In order to settle the finances, he has to go to New York, where he discovers a world full of superficiality, of cutthroats and capitalist zealots, all of whom seem to abide by the same logic of disenchantment that supports an unhappy and unhealthy society (Deeds notes on arrival that "They work so hard at living they forget how to live"). But whilst at every turn people seek to take advantage of a man they assume to be simple, Longfellow Deeds counters their opportunism with questions that derail in their simple reasoning. This can only occur, Cavell contends, not because Deeds is possessed of a mind superior in its rationality prior to his arrival in New York, but because the world that New York presents forces him to make sense of it. In the figure of Deeds, a figure only made possible through his interaction with others, Cavell discerns not Descartes himself, but the spirit of Cartesianism, or the 'rediscovery of philosophy'.

What we witness in *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* is less the confirmation or rejection of the assumptions we bring to bear upon it (Is it representative? Is it attempting to control my worldview?), and more the playing out of philosophical questions in the face of assumptions made by those on the screen: how do we discern non-sense when we encounter it? How do we respond to the irrationality of others, especially when it masquerades as accepted reason? Where the literal representation of

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

philosophers on screen invites the viewer to invest in their privileged psychology, to follow Longfellow Deeds' journey is to see him change in response and relation to others, some of whom assume this privileged psychology, others with whom we are invited to sympathise as being flawed in the same way that we know ourselves to be. The interrelations between all characters and their environment, as presented by the film's particular perspective on the world, are exposed in their simultaneity, not in the way they orbit, or are an extension of, a singular mind (Frank Capra's or Gary Cooper's). Merleau-Ponty describes this filmic experience as a montage whose expressive force "lies in its ability to make us sense the coexistence, the simultaneity of lives in the same world, the actors as they are for us and for themselves" (1982, p.55).

The coexistence and simultaneity of things on film do not lend themselves to explanations of the revealed kind as in Cartesian psychology. The case for film as philosophy is instead made on the basis that film can think philosophy (or philosophically) on screen, a form of thinking out loud that can be taken as ordinarily meaningful as speech or conversation itself. It is this face value that Merleau-Ponty also asserts in 'Film and the New Psychology', when he says that "the film does not mean anything but itself" (1982, p.57). The film will mean significantly more once we have let go of the assumption that what we are to be told resides in the mind of its director, or of a central character. Equally, the suspicion that film is trying to do something to us loses the totality of its control if we acknowledge that we too have designs on it, but that the reciprocity and simultaneity that are all part of the film-viewing process can illuminate and disturb those assumptions that we take for granted: "film awakens as much as it enfolds you" (Cavell, 1979, p.17). Cavell finds that the value of film lies not its ability to represent the meaning of things, but *to present* a meaningful world

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

(Cavell, 1979, p.25), one whose irreducibility to its component objects demands a revaluation of meaning according to the whole.

### **Conclusion: the film as educator**

In the last part of this paper, I want to return to the pedagogical import of film alluded to at the beginning. I spoke about the use of the 'two boats' scenario from Christopher Nolan's Batman film, *The Dark Knight*, as an example of how film images can be used to illustrate particular points in education. But such examples, I suggested, say nothing of the very different experience of watching the entirety of *The Dark Knight*. The way I put it, the illustrative use of video in education lent itself to a direct coincidence between thing and its meaning. The illustrative mode is therefore one of contriving and explaining that coincidence for instructive purposes, attempting to control meaning in the image but saying nothing of our actual experience of it.

The critiques of psychologism offered by Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty are critiques of explanation according to a rule, because of its assumption of a knowable object. Their discussions of ambiguity and simultaneity show how significant a part perspective plays in any one understanding of a phenomenon, and how therefore it is important that neither the phenomenon, nor the perceiving mind, is treated as wholly object within its given circumstances. This is not to effect the swing towards a science of subjectivity or relativism, but just to assume that subjectivity plays a part in assuring that perspective cannot, as Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty both observe, 'complete' the image or text.

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

Meaning, Merleau-Ponty says, is "the total movement of speech" (1964, p.80), and not just its component parts. The meaning of a lecture is in its content, and its mode of delivery, and the interaction between lecturer and students; the meaning of film lies also in its narrative, its directorial style and cinematography, and the interaction between characters and their environment. But as with the lecture, it is the simultaneity of things as they are presented (not *represented*), in the immediacy of that event, that constitute the experience of the film. That is to say, they are things that happen on a screen, but at a particular time and place for particular people.

Film's subjectivity means it will always resist the 'completion', or explanation, of the meaning of its images according to any one theory – not least because it is populated with phenomena, with objects, that call attention to "their conspicuousness, their obtrusiveness, and their obstinacy" (Cavell, 1978, p.250). The fact that they do this in motion is an active reminder of their resistance to completion, as only freeze-framing allows for the capturing of an essential idea. Cavell describes this quality of motion pictures as one whereby film "lets the world happen" (1979, p.25), and if we accept that as viewers we cannot control how it does that, then our response will always depend somewhat on the circumstances and perspective of viewing. These responses fall into the category of what Stanley Cavell calls 'film criticism', the conversation about film (its description) that he sees as emerging from responses to the film itself, rather than as impositions of theoretical lenses upon it. This is not to say that the language employed by theory is not also common to that which facilitates criticism. But criticism is an expression of meaning as it is experienced, as opposed to meaning as somehow concealed (in the mode of production, in the male gaze, etc.). As such, the critic is able to give expression to the simultaneity of things, to take responsibility for articulations as

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

ones that don't appeal to the higher authority of theory, and invite the responses of others in the process.

Films can only generate criticism if they are seen as "letting a world happen", in its simultaneity of coherent objects and the subjectivity that threatens to undermine that coherence (scepticism). If we hold that pedagogy is more than just curriculum or method of delivery, then we can start to see how film might act as pedagogue also: it has the potential to present worlds to students that do not directly coincide with the education of their experience, that do not condescend to theory to explain that experience, and can ask valuable questions of that experience and the meaning of education in the process. Allowing film to act as teacher is a reminder to relinquish control over teaching – letting education happen – which can only take place if those teaching relinquish some control over the visual, what it means to see. To ask *Cartesius* to teach Cartesianism cannot have quite the intended effect here, for reasons aforementioned: the representation of Descartes enacts precisely Cavell's issue of 'naming the prostitute' in its didacticism.

## References

Bauer, N. (2005) 'Cogito Ergo Film: Plato, Descartes, and Fight Club', in Read, R. and Goodenough, J. (Eds.) *Film as Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bauer, N. (2015) 'Reel Girls and Real Girls: What Becomes of Women on Film?',

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

Cavell, S. (1979) *The World Viewed*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cavell, S. (1978) 'What Becomes of Things on Film?' *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 2, Number 2, Fall 1978, pp. 249-257

Cavell, S. (1995) 'The Thought of Movies', in Freeland, C. and Wartenberg, T. (Eds.) *Philosophy and Film*. London: Routledge.

Cavell, S. (2005) 'What Becomes of Thinking on Film', in Read, R. and Goodenough, J. (Eds.) *Film as Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Colman, F. (2009). *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers*. Durham: Acumen Publishing.

Epstein, M. (1975) 'The Common Ground of Merleau-Ponty's and Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Man', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13 (2), pp.221-234.

Klevan, A. (2014) 'Vertigo and the Spectator of Film Analysis', *Film Philosophy* (18): Special Section on Stanley Cavell, pp.147-171

Leopard, D. (2013) *Teaching with the Screen: Pedagogy, Agency, and Media Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964) 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', in *Signs*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1982) 'The Film and the New Psychology' in *Sense and Non-Sense*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2008) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2010) *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures (1949-1952)*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2010) *Institution and Passivity*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Mulhall, S. (2002) *On Film*. London: Routledge.

Polster, B. and Ross, M. (2012) *Math Goes to the Movies*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Standish, P. (2012). "'THIS is Produced by a Brain-Process!': Wittgenstein, Transparency and Psychology Today." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 46(1): 60-72.

Wittgenstein, L. (1958) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: GIBBS, A. (2016), 'What Makes My Image of Him into an Image of Him?': Philosophers on Film and the Question of Educational Meaning. Journal of Philosophy of Education, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12223. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving."

© 2016 Wiley-Blackwell

Wittgenstein, L. (1998) *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.